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SUBJECT: DRC ELECTIONS: LOOKING AHEAD

Classified By: a/dcm msanderson, reasons 1.4 b/d.

11. (C) Summary: With two weeks left in the DRC's election campaign, it is increasingly clear that incumbent president Joseph Kabila is the likely victor. Whether he will win on the first round (i.e., July 30) as his supporters continue to predict is far less certain, although current polling puts him within striking distance of a first-round victory, with about 30% of the polled electorate indicating their intention to vote for him. Actual voter turnout, however, could skew this apparent support.

12. (C) With over 9,700 candidates for 500 seats in the National Assembly it is much harder to call the results, but the strength of the prevailing "throw the bums out" sentiment regarding the transitional government parties suggests that independent candidates could gain many more seats than originally expected. Despite the obvious difficulties in tallying legislative results -- with the huge number of candidates and a wildly complicated ballot -- and the many challenges expected to those results, if Kabila manages a first-round victory it could allow for the new government to be installed as early as October, shortening considerably the period of tenuous uncertainty under the continued governance of the rump transitional government. End Summary.

And The (Likely) Winner Is

13. (C) Although there are 33 presidential candidates registered for the DRC's upcoming July 30 elections, only a handful (6-8) are actually serious candidates capable of conducting effective campaigns. Many others threw their hats in the ring simply to try to negotiate a better post-electoral position in exchange for alliances with more viable candidates, or to attract publicity. This is largely the case with the so-called group of 19, presidential candidates who are currently calling for a freeze of the electoral process to address what they portray as fatal shortcomings in the process. Although a few from the ranks of the 19 (notably Joseph Olengenkoy and Oscar Kashala) are simultaneously pursuing their campaigns, the remainder content themselves with organizing marches and giving interviews to the press to reiterate their opposition to the electoral process. Some high-profile candidates, such as VPs Ruberwa and Bemba, are also playing double hands, endorsing calls for dialog and deploring flaws in the system while aggressively campaigning for election. The inability of the group of 19 to organize significant demonstrations in Kinshasa or elsewhere, however, underscores the determination of the Congolese people to go to elections and avoid another an old-style division of power via backroom political deals.

14. (C) With two weeks left in the electoral campaign it is increasingly clear that incumbent president Joseph Kabila is the likely victor. He enjoys all the normal advantages of an incumbent, plus an ironic boost from the sheer number of mostly unknown opponents. An inexperienced electorate, confronted by the plethora of choices, seems not surprisingly (although perhaps not entirely happily) to be falling back on

the tried-and-true figures of the transition, who incidentally also happen to be the candidates best equipped to conduct nationwide campaigns. Leading contenders, therefore, are VPs Bemba and Ruberwa, Minister of Regional Cooperation Mbusa Nyamwisi, National Assembly member (and former Mobutu-era Central Bank President) Pierre Pay Pay, former transitional government Ministers Eugene Diomi (Mines), and Joseph Olengenkoy (Transport) (note: both of whom were dismissed from the transitional government for corruption) and, of course, Kabila himself. Gizenga, a historic figure along the lines of the UDPS' Tshikedi, could also be a contender despite his relatively small political base because he enjoys wide name recognition and is the only "major" candidate not affiliated with the transition. In terms of Congo's classic east-west political divide these major candidates are evenly split, with 4 easterners (Ruberwa, Nyamwisi, Pay Pay and Kabila) and 4 westerners (Gizenga, Diomi, Olengenkoy and Bemba). This distinction matters because most Congolese expect a "balanced" government after elections, meaning that if easterner Kabila wins the presidency he will be expected to choose a western-based Prime Minister whose party forms part of the National Assembly majority.

The Biggest Part of the Story

15. (C) With 9,706 candidates for the 500 National Assembly seats, it is harder to call the results. Although initially it seemed that the three major parties of the transitional government, i.e., the PPRD (loosely affiliated with independent candidate Kabila), MLC (VP Jean-Pierre Bemba's party) and the RCD (VP Azarias Ruberwa's party) were likely to gain most of the seats, that dynamic is shifting. All three parties are suffering a high degree of drift and disorganization, as high-ranking members are preoccupied with conducting their own campaigns and have little time or interest in directing the efforts of their parties. As a result, many candidates from all three parties are effectively stranded, without resources from their central organization and, in many cases, without even knowing what their parties' key messages are since no electoral materials have been distributed. Also, although Kabila and Bemba began their campaigns promptly on June 30 (the day after the campaign season began), Ruberwa only launched his campaign July 12, losing almost two weeks of an already compressed campaign schedule -- and none of the RCD members were able to begin their personal campaigns until Jun 10, when Ruberwa decided that the party should begin campaigning. (Note: The delay stemmed both from Ruberwa being ill, and the sudden death of the RCD's highest-ranking military member, General Sylvain Buki -- Ruberwa and many others remained in Kinshasa until after Buki's funeral. End Note.)

16. (C) The disorganization of the major parties and a prevailing popular sentiment favoring "throwing the bums (of the transition) out" increasingly suggests that independent candidates could do considerably better in the Assembly elections than originally thought. (Note: Kabila is running as an independent in large part to turn the anti-transition dynamic to his favor by distancing himself from his ostensible party, the PPRD, although he continues to rely on the party to provide his campaign infrastructure. End Note.) At this point it seems possible that "independents" might even wind up as part of the majority coalition (with one or more of the "organized" parties as partners) in the future National Assembly. This will affect the president's choice of future Prime Minister, since the individual selected must come from the ranks of the majority party or coalition of the National Assembly.

But When?

17. (C) A first-round victory for Kabila (or any other presidential candidate) would likely hasten the formation of

a new post-election government, conceivably as early as September or October, depending on how long it takes to complete the compilation of official results for the new National Assembly. While the sheer number of presidential candidates makes it difficult for one candidate to achieve a majority on the first round, it is possible (and widely rumored) that several candidates will either withdraw (probably using alleged electoral irregularities as their excuse) or publicly throw their support to a stronger candidate (for instance, Kabila). If the existing candidate list were reduced to something under 20, the odds of a first-round Kabila victory would increase, particularly since current polling shows Kabila already garnering 30% of the polled electorate (a huge margin over his closest competitor, Gizenga, at 11%). If a presidential runoff is needed, currently anticipated sometime in mid-to-late October, it is unlikely that the elected government in Kinshasa could be installed until the end of the year. However, if the number of candidates remains the same, current betting is on a second-round being needed, notwithstanding the confidence of the president's men.

18. (C) In any event, it is worth noting that while polls do suggest a healthy lead for Kabila, polling results must be viewed with some reserve as an indicator of election results. Polling outside of Kinshasa is subject to broad margins of error, and there is no record on which to base an assessment of polling accuracy. Even if the polling methodology is sound, the July 30 election will be the first democratic exercise in over 40 years, and it is not clear that voter responses to pollsters will necessarily correspond to actual votes cast in a polling booth. Voter turnout, too, is something of a wild card, particularly in the Kasai provinces where the UDPS call for a boycott could resonate. It is entirely possible that voter participation rates could create a different electorate profile than that utilized by the pre-election polls. There is simply no electoral track record in the DRC on which to base predictions.

Challenges Ahead

19. (C) Whether first or second round, once installed the newly-elected president will face many challenges, ranging from naming a Prime Ministerial candidate acceptable to the National Assembly majority (and to the country) and, hopefully, competent; encouraging the rapid nomination and acceptance of Ministerial candidates; to working with the new Prime Minister to develop national priorities and a legislative agenda reflecting same. All the above will involve what could be a largely inexperienced and undisciplined National Assembly which must pass key pieces of legislation to begin desperately needed reform processes. The new government will struggle with these and other challenges in a highly charged environment where there will be considerable pressure to deliver quickly on (perhaps unrealistically high) public expectations for change and progress. Real, visible progress on key issues will be needed to establish the newly elected government's credibility.

110. (C) We also anticipate a host of legal challenges from disgruntled, non-victorious candidates (numerically overwhelming for the Assembly seats) and cannot rule out the risk of possible violence by some actors when those legal means fail to change the electoral results. In short, although getting the DRC to elections has posed many challenges, the post-electoral period will be the litmus test of success for the democratic process in the DRC.

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